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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/WE AND NEA/MAG

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION HITS MORATINOS ON WESTERN SAHARA/MOROCCO

Classified By: Political Counselor Kathy Fitzpatrick; reason 1.4 (D).

1. (C) Summary. FM Moratinos faced vigorous opposition criticism this week for declining to condemn Morocco's refusal to admit two Spanish political delegations seeking to visit Laayoun as a demonstration of support for the Sahrawis. The opposition Popular Party has been the most vocal critic, but support for the Sahrawis cuts across party lines and the Zapatero administration has faced criticism from both the right and left for its perceived tilt towards Morocco over the last year. Moratinos is under pressure to demonstrate positive motion on the Western Sahara issue and he responded by pressing for the rapid selection of a UNSYG Personal Representative to replace Alvaro de Soto, dispatching Spain's Deputy Foreign Minister to the region, and gaining Moroccan approval for the visit of an official Parliamentary delegation to Morocco. The Popular Party refused to participate in that delegation and is likely to maintain pressure on Zapatero to harden Spanish policy towards Morocco regarding Western Sahara. In contrast to other foreign relations issues such as Venezuela and Cuba, Zapatero's leftist allies are unlikely to offer much support for his continued demonstration of flexibility on the Western Sahara issue. Our normal Western Sahara contacts indicate that Moratinos is personally handling this issue and limiting information on developments to members of his inner circle. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Opposition politicians sharply criticized Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos for declining to condemn the Moroccan government's June 5 decision to bar the entry of a group of municipal political figures from Madrid, journalists, and human rights monitors who attempted a visit to Laayoun. Political opponents (and even some allies) have asserted that the Zapatero government has tilted to the Moroccan government over the last year at the expense of Spain's traditional support for the Sahrawis and this episode brought their frustrations into the open. The Spanish delegation was organized by the "State Federation of Institutions in Solidarity with the Sahrawi People" and included Socialist (PSOE) and United Left (IU) municipal representatives, as well as journalists and the president of the "Spanish Pro Human Rights League." Its announced purpose was to evaluate human rights conditions in Laayoun in the wake of the recent disturbances by Sahrawi youths. The group traveled to Laayoun from the Canary Islands, but was not permitted to disembark from the airplane and was required to return to Spain. The situation was exacerbated on June 7 by news that Morocco would also bar the entry of a multi-party Catalan delegation that included an IU Parliamentarian. According to Spanish daily "El Pais," Moroccan MFA official Taieb Fassi Fihri said that Morocco would not tolerate interlocutors "who are not impartial...and who are 100% anti-Moroccan." The Catalan delegation announced June 8 that they still planned to proceed to Laayoun, though a PSOE member withdrew from the delegation at the request of the MFA.

3. (SBU) Moratinos moved swiftly to contain the damage and demonstrate GOS activism on the issue. He dispatched Deputy FM Bernardino Leon on a lightning visit to Algiers, Rabat, Tindouf, and Nouakchott to urge calm. An MFA source told Spanish media that Moratinos would also ramp up efforts to have UN Secretary General Kofi Annan name a new Personal Representative to replace Alvaro de Soto. Moratinos reportedly sent a letter to Annan on June 3 urging the selection soon of a high-level figure for that role and was considering convoking other relevant international actors (U.S., France, UK) to get their support for the immediate selection of a new UNSYG Personal Representative. (NOTE: There was no mention in the press of Moratinos' preference that the Personal Representative be a high-level U.S. political figure. END NOTE.)

4. (U) FM Moratinos sought to calm domestic critics by arranging with Moroccan FM Mohamed Benaisa Rabat's acceptance of the visit of an official Spanish Parliamentary delegation to Laayoun sometime in the next two weeks. Opposition Popular Party (PP) Parliamentary spokesman Eduardo Zaplana said that the PP would not participate in the visit, arguing that Moratinos should have forcefully protested the expulsion of the delegation from Madrid. Zaplana said it was "intolerable" for the GOS to negotiate with Moroccan officials regarding which Spanish political figures could

enter Morocco and which could not. Unnamed PP sources later said they might amend their earlier refusal to accompany the delegation if the GOS also invited journalists and members of the NGOs that had been barred from entry by Morocco.

15. (C) Percival Manglano, foreign relations coordinator for the PP Parliamentary group, told us that the PP was taking the hardest line on this issue, but that a considerable number of Socialist and United Left legislators also believed Moratinos had undermined the rights of Sahrawis by not taking a tougher stand against the expulsion of the Madrid delegation. Manglano said that Morocco's decision to bar the visit of the Catalan delegation made it unlikely that Spanish legislators from the right or left would be willing to participate in the visit arranged by Moratinos.

16. (C) Moratinos undermined his own efforts to reach out to the opposition when he allegedly told members of the Parliamentary Spain-Morocco Friendship Group, including PP Senator Cristina Tejedor, that Spanish leftists supported the Sahrawis "out of solidarity, while the right is nostalgic for colonialism and wants the (Spanish Foreign) Legion to return to Sahara." Socialist participants in the meeting disputed whether Moratinos had used this precise expression, but PP legislators reacted angrily nonetheless and demanded Moratinos' resignation.

//COMMENT//

17. (C) This episode has proven particularly challenging for Moratinos and Zapatero because of the depth of feeling on the Western Sahara issue within their own leftist political base.

Many PSOE and IU members are as skeptical as their center-right PP rivals of Zapatero's decision to demonstrate greater flexibility on the resolution of the dispute. There is understanding of the broad strategic imperatives underlying Zapatero's efforts to repair a bilateral relationship with Morocco strained during the Aznar administration, but there is equally strong emotional support for the Sahrawis, particularly among long-standing leftist backers of the Polisario. Zapatero can easily afford to antagonize the PP, but he must be far more careful with his far left IU coalition partners. He and Moratinos will be under increasing pressure to adopt a harder line with Rabat regarding both events at Laayoun and on the Western Sahara issue in general.

MANZANARES